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A 'Third Option' in Nicaragua

The agonizing debate over U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan contras appears to be impossible to resolve in a way that will satisfy both the Reagan administration and its critics.

Desirable as it would be to get rid of the Sandinista regime, or at least force it to back off its rush toward Marxist tyranny, the contras aren't the ones who can do the job. The Reagan administration's faith in the contras is sadly misplaced, as our reporter Jon Lee Anderson points out in dispatches from Central America.

The truth that cannot be camouflaged is that, after five years, the contras have failed utterly to ignite the massive uprising among the Nicaraguan people, which they have predicted confidently—and without which they cannot prevail.

It doesn't matter whether this failure is due to the contras' military ineptitude or to their dubious origin as a Somo-cista-tainted creature of the CIA. In all their sporadic incursions there has been no sign of the popular support.

The result of the contra operations has been to give the Sandinistas an excuse for building up their military with aid from the Soviet bloc. Managua now has an army of 60,000, easily able to fend off attacks by the contras, who number perhaps 12,000 but have never had more than half that many in action inside Nicaragua.

Since 1982, the contras have received more than \$80 million from the CIA, \$27 million in "humanitarian aid" from Congress and about \$15 million in private funding through the World Anti-Communist League. Yet they have never made any serious invasion of Nicaragua or managed to hold so much as a sliver of Nicaraguan territory.

There is more fault to be laid at the contra leaders' door: they are dependent on the Hondurans—yet they have failed to develop either an amicable relationship with their reluctant hosts or secure safe alternative supply lines for their necessities. Their aid is channeled through the Honduran army; serious "skimming" is routine.

So hapless have the contras become

that last fall, when the Honduran government imposed a ban on U.S. supply flights to the contra camps to avoid embarrassment over the contras' illegal presence in Honduras, the doughty guerrilla commanders raised piteous cries that their fighters were barefoot. That, they announced, was why they had had to call off the war temporarily.

What makes this alibi particularly humiliating is that next door in El Salvador an antigovernment guerrilla group, the leftist FMLN, has been operating for years inside its own country. The 6,000 to 8,000 Salvadoran rebels are outnumbered at least eight to one by the army they're fighting, and unlike the contras in Honduras, they have no sanctuary to which they can retreat across the border in the event of a military setback.

Is there no choice for the United States other than supporting the Keystone Contras or letting Nicaragua become a permanent Soviet satellite?

There is.

The BOS (from the Spanish initials for Southern Opposition Bloc) is a Nicaraguan coalition of four popularly based labor, professional and political groups with support inside Nicaragua and among the exile community. BOS is solidly anti-Sandinista but is untainted by ties to the Somoza dictatorship and its hated National Guard.

One BOS component, ARDEN, is led by Eden Pastora, the ex-Sandinista famous as Commander Zero. His group is the only BOS member that has a military force, and while far smaller than the contras' army, it has been at least as effective on Nicaragua's southern flank—and with barely a pittance in U.S. aid.

The difference in outlook between the contras and BOS is significant. "We do not consider ourselves counterrevolutionaries," Dr. Alvaro Jerez explained to our associate Lucette Lagnado. "We consider ourselves dissidents. [BOS] is not against the revolution. . . . We are against the Sandinistas." Jerez is a neurosurgeon based in Washington and heads the professional component of BOS.

BOS is a credible "third option." Like the sturdiest Reagan hard-liner, BOS leaders believe fervently that the Sandinista regime is undemocratic and growing more repressive by the day. But like the Democrats in Congress, BOS leaders also believe that the Sandinistas can be forced to the negotiating table if faced with a more robust rival than the contras—and one less politically suspect.

The BOS "dissidents" are "clean" politically, but they are not naive. They reject any aid from the CIA, which they rightfully regard as the kiss of death for any popular movement in Nicaragua, where suspicion of U.S. motives is endemic. But they welcome the idea of open support from the White House and Congress, just as they have cultivated support from Central American and Western European countries.

They could take the president and Congress off the horns of their Nicaraguan dilemma.

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